

# Prerequisites of Internationally Capable Terrorist Organizations

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Since 9/11, much has been written about terrorism and what causes it. This paper will not address the commonly perceived 'root causes' of non-state international terrorism like poverty or state failure, nor will it focus on the Islamic extremist ideology so rampant today. Instead, it will look at commonalities between non-state terrorist groups that have demonstrated capability to carry out successful international attacks over a period of several years. These terrorist groups may not have achieved their political aims, but they were all able to carry out multiple international terror attacks. By comparing al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Japanese Red Army (JRA), and others, I will show that there are four key factors common to their limited successes. These factors are 1) international ideology, 2) exiled leadership, 3) geographic sanctuary and connectivity, and 4) external support.<sup>1</sup> With these factors in mind, the US and other like-minded nations can better allocate resources for counter and anti-terrorist efforts around the world. Before we delve into the prerequisites, a little history is in order.

AQAP is an al-Qaeda franchise organization based in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. AQAP is an outgrowth of the formalized union in 2009 of al-Qaeda in Yemen and displaced al-Qaeda members from Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> The history of AQAP is long and distinguished. Many of the current senior members worked with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan before the fall of the Taliban, and the group was also linked to several attacks between 2000 and 2003 in Yemen. These include the attempted attack of the *USS The Sullivans* and the successful attacks on the *USS Cole* and French tanker *The Limburg*.<sup>3</sup> After two key leaders were killed or captured, the group encountered increased resistance in Yemen and shifted its efforts to Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2006 while many Yemeni jihadists filtered to Iraq. On February 3, 2006, several future key leaders escaped during a jailbreak from a prison in the capitol of Sana'a.<sup>4</sup> This jailbreak coincided with increased law enforcement pressure on the members in Saudi Arabia, which facilitated a change in personnel. Following this change in personnel, attacks began to refocus on western interests in Yemen, including several attacks on tourist groups, the Italian embassy, and the US embassy that killed more than 34 people.<sup>5</sup>

In 2007, AQAP entered a new phase when it began projecting power onto US and European shores. It has been linked to the unsuccessful Fort Dix attack, the Ft. Hood attack in 2009, the unsuccessful aircraft bombing near Detroit (the so-called 'underwear bomber'), and an unsuccessful Times Square car bomb in 2010.<sup>6</sup> The attackers in all these instances drew inspiration from or were advised by Anwar al-Awlaki, the online cleric of AQAP. Most recently,

the group was responsible for two unsuccessful bombs aboard cargo aircraft in the UK and UAE on October 29, 2010.<sup>7</sup> Since this episode, events in Yemen have kept the group local and it is difficult to tell what violence inside the country can be attributed to which faction. It is safe to assume that AQAP is behind some of the recent violence against the Yemeni government, and sought to undermine the recent election to replace President Saleh.<sup>8</sup>

There have been numerous successful attacks in the last 12 years, but the *USS Cole* and Ft. Hood stand out for their high number of US casualties, 17 and 13 respectively.<sup>9</sup> Even AQAP's high profile failures help draw attention to their cause and provoke military and non-military responses from the US, which served to undermine the Yemeni regime in some eyes.<sup>10</sup> AQAP has also helped to destabilize Yemen with numerous attacks on government and Western targets, but it remains to be seen if they can achieve a position of leadership among the tribes. Finally, AQAP has successfully expanded the al-Qaeda franchise, which likely contributed to the recently announced alliance of al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda.

The JRA was a part of the leftist terrorist movement that gained notoriety in the 1970's. It started as an outgrowth of the Japanese communist political movement in the 1960's, and did not progress to terrorism until the hijacking of an aircraft on March 30, 1970.<sup>11</sup> Following this incident, the local JRA leadership made a series of missteps in Japan that led their key leader, Shigenobu Fusako, to look for ways to further a more international agenda.<sup>12</sup> In early 1971, Shigenobu ultimately blazed the JRA trail to Lebanon and started its relationship with the PLO and PFLP.<sup>13</sup> The remaining group came under police pressure and political infighting that eventually led to a virtual eradication of the group in Japan by early 1972.

Meanwhile in Lebanon, Shigenobu had created a safe haven for fellow JRA members, and they quickly took advantage with a deadly attack on the Lod airport in Tel Aviv that killed 28 and injured 78 on May 30, 1972.<sup>14</sup> After that attack, the JRA and PFLP hijacked a Japan Air Lines 747 out of Paris and eventually wound up in Libya after a 3 day odyssey through Dubai and Syria.<sup>15</sup> No hostages were killed, but the aircraft was destroyed. After operations in Singapore and the Netherlands, the group achieved their first prisoner release in 1975 after a successful hostage taking at the American consulate and Swedish Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.<sup>16</sup> The JRA again convinced the Japanese government to release prisoners in 1977 after hijacking an aircraft in Bombay, India and forcing it to land in Bangladesh.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1980's, the JRA focused their attention on US targets. They saw the Japanese government as puppets for the US, and resented the US 'imperialistic' foreign policies and bases in Japan. In 1986 and 1987, the JRA conducted a series of bombings against the US and Japanese embassies in Jakarta, the US embassy in Madrid, and the US and UK embassies in Rome.<sup>18</sup> The JRA's final major attacks coincided with the 2 year anniversary of the April 1986 US bombing raid in Libya, and illustrate the focus on US imperialism as its new enemy. They successfully bombed a USO club in Naples that killed 5, and had a second attack in New York City thwarted when an alert police officer

noticed Kikumura Yu acting suspiciously and arrested him.<sup>19</sup> After 1988, little was heard from the JRA, and in 2000 Shigenobu Fusako was arrested in Japan which led to the group's disbanding in 2001.<sup>20</sup>

The first similarity between the JRA and AQAP is in their belief in an internationally oriented ideology. The primary goal of AQAP is in line with al-Qaeda's vision for an Islamic caliphate. It seeks to eliminate the local regime in Yemen, which they see as a puppet for a "Crusader-Zionist alliance."<sup>21</sup> To this end, AQAP has attempted to politically align itself with the powerful tribes in Yemen. AQAP supports both the northern Houthi and Southern antigovernment movements, but because the Houthi are Shi'a, AQAP does not see them as a likely ally.<sup>22</sup> In addition to a change in government, AQAP also seeks to rid the Arabian Peninsula of non-Muslims and acquire safe areas for training and operations in Yemen.<sup>23</sup> AQAP also seeks to offer a counter to Yemen's high unemployment rate (35%), high growth rate (3.2% / year), and dwindling oil reserves, all of which are major economic issues.<sup>24</sup> AQAP's vision focuses on the international aspects of installing Islamic government across the entire caliphate, starting in Yemen. As part of a broader Islamic extremist movement, the international aspect of AQAP's ideology provides part of the motive to extend their operations into the international arena.

The JRA sought to overthrow the Japanese government and bring about an international communist revolution.<sup>25</sup> While initially formed in Japan, the group was under a fair amount of pressure in their home country when they started to reach out to other Leftist groups circa 1970. In a strange twist of fate, several Palestinian groups were in transition to Lebanon after the 'Black September' crackdown in Jordan.<sup>26</sup> This led to the alliance of the JRA and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a sympathetic Marxist group. The JRA took advantage of training opportunities with the PFLP and cemented their relationship with a devastating attack on Israel's Lod airport, its first major effort on the international stage.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the Marxist revolution, several of the JRA's hostage-taking events later in the 1970's were also attempts to negotiate for prisoner releases in Japan.<sup>28</sup> However, at its heart the JRA sought to bring about the international Marxist revolution, which caused it to cast a wider net for potential targets. Much like AQAP with its quest for an Islamic Caliphate, the JRA also had an internationally oriented ideology.

To illustrate the requirement for an international ideology, it is useful to look at two similar terrorist groups with smaller ambitions. The Fenian Dynamiters conducted attacks against the British Empire during the 1870's in Canada and Australia while receiving support and sanctuary from the Irish diaspora in the US.<sup>29</sup> Their stated goal was Irish independence through striking the enemy now in "Ireland, now in India, now in England itself as occasion may present."<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) of a century later fought against a much smaller British Empire, and did not have an expansive international ideology. The group had external funding and sanctuary, but because it lacked any expansive international agenda, only 3 of its 2,670 attacks occurred outside of Western Europe.<sup>31</sup> Although the two

groups had similar nationalistic goals, the IRA did not attack international targets because it lacked an international ideology. If a terrorist group has goals which include both local and international aspects, it is much more likely to successfully accomplish attacks across international borders.

A second important aspect to international terrorism is exiled leadership. AQAP's leadership has been relatively stable since 2006. Prior to that time there were several leadership changes due to arrests and military action. In 2006, Nasser al-Wahayshi escaped from prison as part of the Sana'a jailbreak and quickly assumed the position as leader of AQAP.<sup>32</sup> Al-Wahayshi is Yemeni and was formerly the personal secretary for Osama Bin Laden. He fought in Afghanistan in 2001, escaped to Iran and was captured in 2002, and was extradited to Yemen where he remained in prison until his escape.<sup>33</sup> Al-Wahayshi's second in command is a man with a similar history, Saeed al-Shihri.<sup>34</sup> Al-Shihri is a Saudi who was arrested in Afghanistan in late 2001 for allegedly helping foreign fighters into the country. He remained at Guantanamo until 2007 when he was repatriated to Saudi Arabia and went through a reintegration program before his release.<sup>35</sup> Following his release he joined AQAP and assumed the role of second in command. Abdullah al-Rimi is the military commander of AQAP.<sup>36</sup> Al-Rimi is wanted in conjunction with the *USS Cole* bombing. He was arrested sometime during 2003-2004 and ended up in the prison at Sana'a where he escaped in 2006.<sup>37</sup> Following his escape, he assumed his role as military commander. Finally, Anwar al-Awlaki was the online cleric for AQAP until his death in September 2011.<sup>38</sup> Awlaki, and his assistant Samir Khan, were both Americans living in Yemen.<sup>39</sup> All these men were either exiled from their homelands in the past, or are currently living in exile. Living in exile helped provide these men with the motive and means to accomplish international attacks.

The JRA leadership lived exclusively in exile during their period of international terror. Shigenobu Fusako was the primary leader of the JRA splinter that remained active after the Japanese government crackdown. She took up residence in Lebanon and remained abroad until after the JRA's final international actions in 1988.<sup>40</sup> In fact, when she was arrested in Japan in November of 2000, she had been back in the country for less than 6 months after fleeing a crackdown on the JRA in Lebanon.<sup>41</sup> The number two man in the JRA, Maruoke Osamu, also lived abroad for a large chunk of his life. Beginning in 1971 with his departure to Lebanon, he spent time in training and operations ranging from Benghazi to Manila before his arrest in Japan in November 1987.<sup>42</sup> During the time of his arrest, it is suspected that he was attempting to reestablish a domestic JRA footprint in Japan to prepare for the April 1988 effort against US bases overseas. Another key leader for the JRA, Wako Haruo, participated in many of the key hijackings in the 1970s and also lived in Lebanon.<sup>43</sup> He was arrested in the March 2000 crackdown in Lebanon, and extradited to Japan.<sup>44</sup> The JRA leadership lived outside of Japan due to police action against it, and the group did not truly fall on hard times until they lost their sanctuary in Lebanon.

Living in exile is a common theme to some of the most notorious international terrorists of the past 50 years. Osama bin Laden grew up in Saudi Arabia before his exile to Afghanistan, Sudan, and Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri was from Egypt before moving on to the same al-Qaeda friendly countries.<sup>46</sup> Abu Nidal was born in Jaffa, Palestine (now Tel Aviv) and lived in exile around the Middle East after the formation of Israel.<sup>47</sup> Before their active careers in Jordan and Lebanon, Yasser Arafat grew up in Cairo, and Carlos 'The Jackal' came from Venezuela. Obviously living in exile does not make a person into an international terrorist, but it does have a correlation with which terrorists export their actions internationally. The motivation to act internationally is much greater when a key leader of the group has historical ties across international boundaries. Terrorist groups that act on an international scale, especially over longer distances, need extra motivation. This motivation is often supplied by exiled leadership who think in terms of an international audience, not just a local one.

Another key prerequisite for international terrorism is geographic sanctuary and connectivity. In Yemen, the actual topography is not as important as the existence of ungoverned areas. AQAP takes advantage of a weak national government to ally itself with tribal leaders and gain refuge.<sup>48</sup> The national government is unable to enforce the law in certain tribal areas, and is weak in policing its borders and transit points. AQAP can use the refuge in Yemen to train and foment jihad. In their case, connectivity to the rest of the world became difficult with travel restrictions and new policing techniques like facial recognition software. The Sana'a airport today is not as ungoverned as the rest of the country. However, Yemen offered connectivity in other ways that were difficult for the government to stop. In Yemen, there are 12 million mobile phones and land lines, and another 2.3 million internet users.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, Somalia has 748,000 telephones and 106,000 internet users.<sup>50</sup> Although terrorists in Somalia could still have connectivity through satellite phones, there is safety and efficiency in numbers. Telecommunications spread through a significant portion of the Yemeni population, making it very difficult to prevent or exploit the methods that AQAP connected with the world. This connectivity enabled AQAP to spread their message to the 'Lone Wolf' terrorist living elsewhere. The combination of sanctuary and connectivity found in Yemen is a critical geographical enabler to AQAP.

The JRA also exploited geography in much the same way. Lebanon in the 1970's was a safe haven to many terrorist organizations, mostly Palestinian. The JRA used this sanctuary to train and elude capture from international authorities. While considered 'ungoverned,' Lebanon still retained international access with a fully functional international airport at Beirut. In fact, the US did not act to isolate the Lebanese airport and airlines until after a hijacking in 1985.<sup>51</sup> The Secretary of State explained the motive "to place off limits internationally that airport until the people of Beirut place terrorists off limits."<sup>52</sup> As a unilateral tool this move was more a diplomatic maneuver than an enforcement measure, but it demonstrates the importance of connectivity to the international terrorist. Throughout the JRA's heyday, they enjoyed access

to an international airport with less than stellar security, which enabled them to spread their terror to areas on the globe near and far. The essential combination of geographical sanctuary and connectivity is a critical aspect of successful international terrorism.

There are several other examples throughout history that illustrate this phenomenon. States that sponsor terrorism can achieve success because they control their own territory and connect with the international community. One can look to Libya in the 1980s and Iran since 1979 as two examples of countries that enabled terrorist groups to maintain momentum. Ungoverned areas like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and southern Somalia are hotbeds for terrorist training. These ungoverned areas are not always conducive to the international terrorist because they often lack connectivity. Early in the Global War on Terror, the emphasis was on South America's Tri-Border Area (TBA), shared by Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.<sup>53</sup> This area provided sanctuary (if you knew the right people), and is known as a smuggling area, but the surrounding countries have been able to prevent international terrorist groups from taking root there. Obviously there are varying degrees of sanctuary and connectivity, and the TBA attracted a high level of scrutiny after September 11, 2001.<sup>54</sup> Notably, there has been no major international terrorist activity from this region since that time.

The final enabling prerequisite for international terrorists is external support. The support provides the logistics for action, while the external source provides motivation to act on a wider stage. AQAP received much of its support from al-Qaeda and benefactors in Saudi Arabia. The external support is well documented and is an ongoing problem, according to recently leaked government documents.<sup>55</sup> External support is crucial to AQAP's intent to act internationally because it provides contacts with the world outside Yemen and motivates action to stay in the public eye to prompt further fundraising efforts. There is also an element of motivation that comes from major donors applying pressure to the organization to act in specific target areas. For example, if these donors live in Saudi Arabia they would likely want to see action eventually spread into Saudi territory. External support is not only crucial to the means of international terrorists, but also to the motive.

The JRA also received external support during much of its lifetime. This support started in 1970 when Shigenobu formed an alliance with the PLO and PFLP.<sup>56</sup> Out of this alliance the JRA received training and a great deal of support from the Palestinians. This support continued through the early 80s when the JRA turned to Colonel Qaddafi in Libya.<sup>57</sup> Towards the end the ties between the JRA and state sponsors became closer, but the JRA never truly qualified as a state-sponsored organization. It was careful to choose allies that were on the same political page and working toward the overall Marxist revolution. The requirement for external support meant that in some instances the JRA could be manipulated into action. The attack on the Tel Aviv airport in 1972 was an effort at solidifying the alliance with the Palestinians. Later, the 1988 attacks on American targets in New York and Naples were likely

conducted at the request of Qaddafi in retaliation for the American aircraft strike. There has been no evidence to show that the JRA put themselves out for hire like Carlos or Abu Nidal, but the group was influenced in its targeting due to its external support.

The PLO and PFLP also used external support extensively. Expatriate Palestinians and Arab states provided funding for the PLO.<sup>58</sup> In addition, the KGB provided arms and training for Palestinian and other Marxist terror organizations.<sup>59</sup> Between these sources of external support, both organizations had plenty of motivation to act internationally. It is interesting to note that PFLP attacks outside of the Middle East stopped in 1991, the same year the USSR broke apart. Figure 1 has the data broken out by year and region for the PFLP.<sup>60</sup> The PFLP is an excellent example of external funding playing a direct role in international target selection. The data is not definitive since there could also have been a change in other circumstances during this timeframe (i.e. leadership, sanctuary, or strategy).

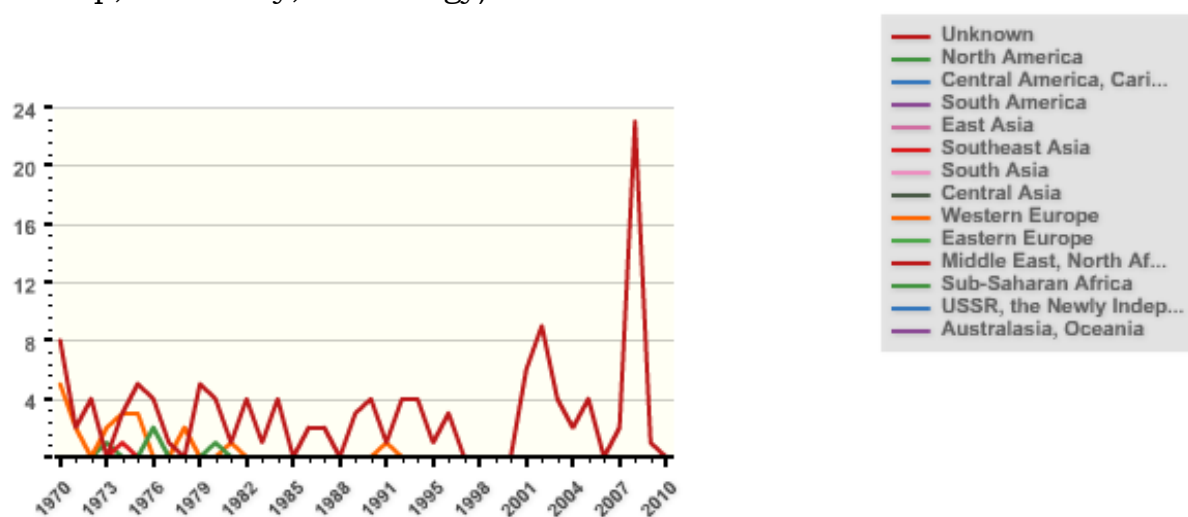


Figure 1, PFLP attacks by region

The logical conclusion is to focus US counterterrorist and antiterrorist efforts with this knowledge in hand. First we will look at antiterrorist efforts, or the use of measures to prevent terrorism through indirect action. Instead of sending foreign aid to every failing state that has possible sanctuaries for terrorists, the US can focus this aid based on the remaining factors. Without having specific intelligence on future foreign terrorist organizations, a logical predictor of exiled leadership is a country's number of accepted refugees. A higher proportion of refugees that live within a country should correlate with the likelihood that exiles may resort to terrorism. Additionally, since most failing states have international travel opportunities that are difficult to analyze (e.g. overland), a good predictor of international connectivity is the proportion of the population that are internet users. It would be difficult to predict which future terrorist groups would hate the West enough to produce an internationally minded ideology, or which groups would receive external

support in the future, so a quick analysis based on these factors (security failure, internet users, and refugees) should be enlightening.

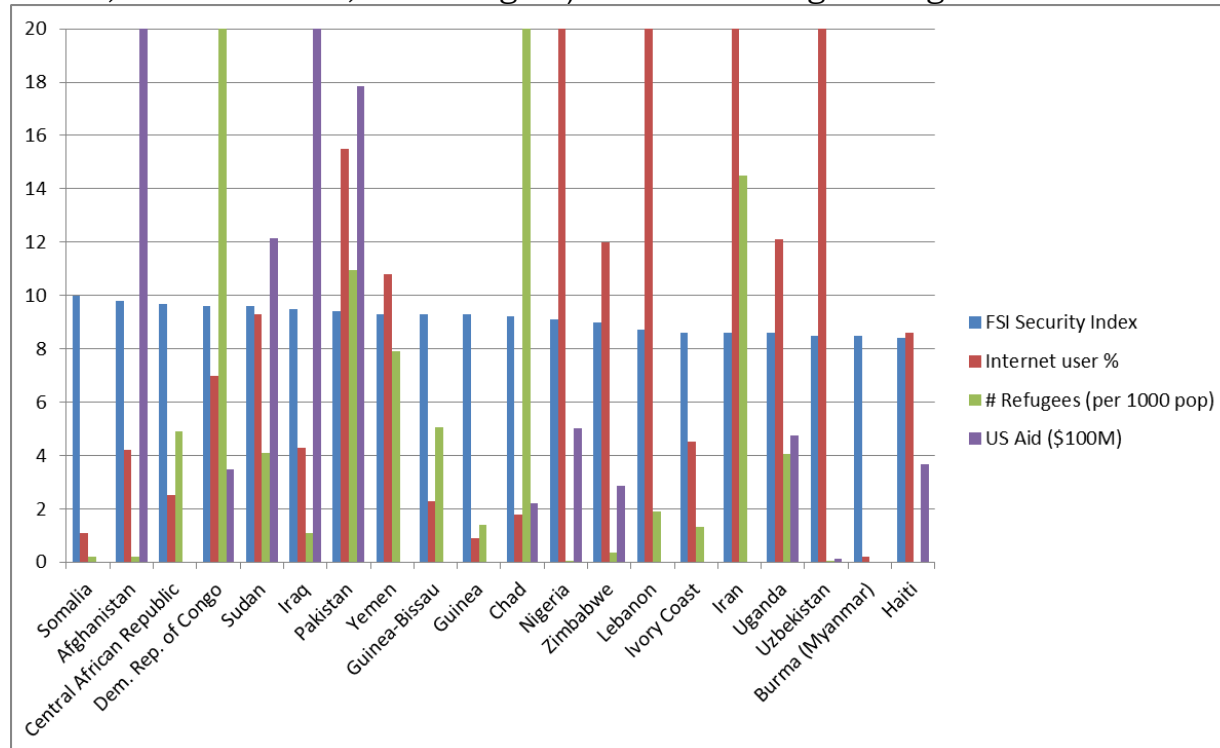


Figure 2

Figure 2 illustrates a grouping of countries that are possible destinations for foreign aid. The FSI Security Index comes from ForeignPolicy.com and their Failed State index from 2011. The graph shows the worst 20 countries when ranked by the ‘Security Apparatus’ index.<sup>61</sup> The Internet user % is the percentage of the population that has internet access.<sup>62</sup> The final statistic, from the UNHCR, is the ratio of the number of refugees in a country divided by the country’s population times 1000.<sup>63</sup> As can be seen by the data, several countries rank near the bottom in all three categories, including: Congo, Sudan, Pakistan, Yemen, Iran, and Uganda. These countries are the most likely to produce internationally capable terrorist groups because they are likely to have sanctuaries, international connectivity, and exiles living within the country. The US and its allies should focus applicable foreign aid and antiterrorist efforts (e.g. military training, traveller screening, and internet monitoring) in these countries. As can be seen from the data, many of the countries do not receive much in terms of US aid in 2009 (notably Congo, Yemen, and Uganda).<sup>64</sup> If terrorism is a top priority in the national security arena, these countries should be given more attention.

In the counterterrorism realm, the US military and intelligence services should focus effort first on foreign terrorist groups or cells that have all four prerequisites present. Effort is less effective when used on groups that only possess one or two of the prerequisites. Once these groups have been identified, action should be taken to eliminate one or more of the prerequisites.



Direct action should focus on killing or capturing the exiled leadership personalities. Diplomatic pressure should focus on eliminating safe havens for identified groups. Surveillance should focus on monitoring and blocking the methods of communication and travel used by specified groups and in specified locations. Diplomatic efforts should seek to make it difficult to transfer money to these groups and difficult for their personnel to travel. Finally, information campaigns should be waged against these organizations to convince them to shift their international objectives inward to local or regional targets.

In conclusion, this analysis has shown the 4 prerequisites of capable international terrorist organizations and suggested antiterrorist and counterterrorist strategies to combat them. The US should worry most about terrorists that have 1) internationally oriented ideology, 2) exiled leadership, 3) geographic sanctuary and connectivity, and 4) external support. While all terrorists work outside the international system, terrorist groups that have these characteristics are most likely to be successful in attacks on the US and its allies. The strategy to counter these groups should focus on prevention, prediction, and action to counter existing groups. These efforts should be focused through at least one of the four prerequisites. Terrorist organizations of this type need to be aggressively countered because once they have all four prerequisites; they can cause problems for decades.

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## Notes

1. These factors are a slight variation on Galula's prerequisites of successful insurgency 1) cause, 2) weakness of the counterinsurgent, 3) geographic conditions, and 4) outside support. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 11-28.
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